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ABSTRACT

The article presents six remedial handwriting activities which address a variety of deficits commonly affecting the handwriting of learning disabled (LD) students. Each activity is presented with a rationale, step-by-step instructions, exemplary worksheets as necessary, and suggestions for teaching. In the "Coin Challenge" students learn correct hand position by attempting to keep a coin balanced on the wrist; In "Letter Charting" students are provided with overt rehearsal to facilitate encoding; In "Letter Form Practice" task relevance is stressed to encourage accurate practice; In "Stretch It Out" and "Margin Underlays" students are provided with strong visual cues to remediate handwriting faults resulting from faulty perceptive and discriminative skills; In "Conducting Letters" students develop gross motor skills while modeling the letter strokes to music. (DB)

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Handwriting Instruction for the Learning Disabled: Six Remediative Activities for the Improvement of Skills

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Abstract

Handwriting is a skill which is integral to academic success. Students use handwriting in their written work as well as for purposes of functional communication. Learning disabled students often have deficits which impact negatively on their handwriting skills. Because handwriting as a communication/language arts skill is so essential to academic pursuits and daily living, it is vitally important that learning disabled students experiencing difficulties receive remediation in this area. This article will present six remediative handwriting activities for implementation by educators of the learning disabled.

Handwriting Instruction for the Learning Disabled: Six Remediative Activities for the Improvement of Skills

Handwriting is a skill which affects the academic success of all students. Legible handwriting is an important learning and living skill. Students with legible handwriting possess a powerful means of reinforcing and enhancing other learning (Enstrom, 1966). Handwriting skill is essential to meeting the demands of the content oriented curriculum, where note-taking and written expression are pivotal to academic success. Students are evaluated both directly and indirectly on the basis of handwriting legibility, neatness, and speed. Researchers have found that teachers consistently assign higher grades to papers with clear handwriting, regardless of their content (Chase, 1968; Briggs, 1970).

Learning disabled students have deficits which often impact negatively on their handwriting. Because of their unique handicaps, learning disabled students frequently require modified instruction in order to develop their skills in this area (Arena, 1970). This remediative instruction is generally not available to the LD student. Handwriting is generally taught as an integral part of the language arts curriculum. Remedial handwriting instruction, however, is virtually non-existant in most schools today (Enstrom, 1965).

This article will present six remediative handwriting activities that are designed to address a variety of deficits which commonly affect the handwriting of LD students. Each

activity is presented with a rationale, step by step instructions, exemplary worksheets as necessary, and suggestions for teaching in order to facilitate teacher implementation.

Activity 1: The Coin Challenge

Rationale. The instrinsic muscles of the hand bear a strong influence on the legibility of handwriting. Correct position of the hand and arm results in handwriting that is legible without exhausting the student. LD students have been found to have poor control and efficiency of the instrinsic muscles of the hand and arm (Eaton, Lippman, & Riley, 1980; Kaminsky & Powers, 1981). LD students need experience with activities that develop efficient use and control of these muscles while providing immediate feedback.

Example. To help LD students to develop greater efficiency and control of the intrinsic muscles of the hand, the following activity is suggested:

Step 1. The teacher provides each student with a penny or similar object and writing materials.

Step 2. The teacher demonstrates for the students the proper way to hold the writing instrument and the correct position of the hands and paper.

Step 3. The teacher then directs the students to place their pennies on the wrist of their writing hand.

Step 4. The teacher informs the students that if the penny falls off to the side away from their bodies, their

wrists are rolling back to the edge position. This is an indication of too much finger or wrist movement rather than arm movement.

Step 5. The students are instructed to begin their writing exercise, during which they are to attempt to keep the penny on their wrist. Students who are successful with the exercise are allowed to keep their coins.

Suggestions for Teaching. It is recomended that this exercise be introduced for a very brief initial exercise. After this, the exercise may be used on a regular basis, increasing the time demands of the task gradually, in order to optimize student success.

Activity 2: Letter Charting

Rationale. The recall of visual symbols is essential to the mastery of handwriting. LD students have been found to have memory deficits which affect their ability to recall and produce visual symbols (Arena, 1970; Cieslicki, 1980). Beck (1981) suggests that the provision of varied overt rehearsal assists the LD student in recall processes in addition to facilitating initial encoding.

Example. To help LD students to encode and recall visual symbols through the use of varied overt rehearsal, the following activity is suggested:

Step 1. The teacher instructs the students to write capital letters on their paper in chart form as in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

Step 2. The class selects a theme such as "Animals".

Step 3. Students in the class generate the names of animals that begin with the capital letters, as they proceed down the chart.

Step 4. Before and after each animal name is generated, the teacher reviews the pattern of movements for each capital letter with the class. The teacher models the production of each letter at the blackboard, while saying it aloud. This is followed by the class verbalizing each letter while writing it.

Suggestions for Teaching. This activity may be varied through the use of small letters and different topical areas. Topical areas should be drawn from among those that students display an interest in or knowledge of, in order to capitalize upon student interest and enthusiasm.

Activity 3: Letter Form Practice

Rationale. Many LD students have attention deficits which impede their skills acquisition and production (Stephens, 1976; Bryan & Bryan, 1978; Eaton, Lippman, & Riley, 1980). These students are characterized by their high rate of off-task behaviors, poor concentration, and a general lack of persistence in academic and other endeavors (McKinney, McClure, & Feagans, 1982). Direct instruction has been found to reduce the incidence of off-task behaviors

among such students and results in greater academic gains (Zentall & Lieb, 1985). Further, when task relevance is emphasized, the gains achieved through the implementation of direct instruction are amplified (Gersten, 1985).

Example. To help the LD student with attention deficits to improve his/her handwriting skills, the following activity is suggested:

Step 1. The teacher provides all students with the necessary handwriting materials.

Step 2. The teacher introduces the "letter" of the lesson, models its production, and elicits the generation of words in which the letter may be found by the students. This is done to stimulate student interest and demonstrate the relevance of practice with that particular letter.

Step 3. The teacher demonstrates the effects of illegibility in the context of the words that have been generated. (For example, if the letter of the lesson is "b", and the generated word is ball, what happens when the "b" looks like another letter?)

Step 4. The teacher next instructs the students to practice their 'best' letter (the one they can write the best) for a brief warm-up exercise. This will provide a standard of quality for the rest of the lesson.

Step 5. The teacher then instructs the students to begin their practice with the letter of the lesson, and circulates about the room providing positive reinforcement and individual instruction where needed.

Step 6. After the students have completed two or three lines of practice on the letter of the lesson, they are instructed first to copy a line of words (provided by the teacher) in which the letter appears in the initial position, then a line of words in which the letter appears in a middle position, and finally, a line of words in which the letter appears in the final position.

Suggestions for Teaching. This activity is particularly useful as a practice activity which provides ample time for the teacher to circulate and offer individual instruction and remediation.

Activities 4 & 5: Stretch It Out / Margin Underlays

Rationale. LD students often have deficits in their visual perceptive and discriminative skills; these deficits affect the students' abilities to perceive the spatial requirements of handwriting (Arena, 1970; Eaton, et. al., 1980). Handwriting samples of such students are often characterized by inconsistent spacing, writing off the line, and inconsistent letter formation (Arena, 1970). These deficits are best overcome through the use of materials which provide strong visual cues (Bachman & Law, 1961; Donoghue, 1985)

Example. Activity 4. Stretch It Out

To help LD students with visual-perceptual handicaps who have difficulties with letter spacing the following activity is suggested:

Step 1. The teacher discusses the matter of correct spacing with the students. (Ask questions such as: Why are letters that are crowded or unevenly spaced difficult to read? How much space should you allow between letters?)

Step 2. The teacher provides the students with handwriting materials, including a 'Stretch It Out' worksheet (see Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 about here

Step 3. The teacher provides the students with a brief writing exercise which is to be copied. The students are instructed to copy this their worksheets, making sure that the letters are spaced so that one letter is written between each vertical line. The teacher should demonstrate to the students how this will help to "even up" their spacing.

Suggestions for Teaching. The teacher should explain that this is somewhat artificial and some letters (like w) will actually need more space. However, practicing this way will increase students' awareness of letter spacing.

Example. Activity 5. Margin Underlays

To help LD students with visual-perceptual handicaps who have difficulty adhering to uniform margins, the following activity is suggested:

Step 1. The teacher shows the class samples of writing which exhibit both even and eneven margins, and discusses with the class how a proper margin affects the appearance of

written work.

Step 2. The teacher provides each student with handwriting materials, a brief "poor" sample to copy and correct, and a 'Margin Underlay Sheet' (see Figure 3).

Insert Figure 3 about here.

Step 3. The teacher then instructs the students to place the margin underlay beneath their paper, and points out to them the visibility of the margin guides through the paper.

Step 4. The teacher directs the students to copy the "poor" sample they have been given, being careful to adhere to the margins which are visible through their worksheets.

Step 5. The teacher circulates through the class, offering assistance to individuals as necessary.

Step 6. The students are allowed to keep their margin underlay guides for use in future written work.

Suggestions for Teaching. After this activity has been introduced, it is wise to keep a supply of extra guide sheets on hand in class at all times. This will allow students to use them whenever they feel the need arises.

Activity 6: Conducting Letters

Rationale. Handwriting requires both gross and fine motor development and coordination. LD students have been found deficient in their gross motor development (Bryan, et.

al., 1978; Eaton, et al., 1980) by comparison to their peers who are not learning disabled.

Cieslicki (1980) has found that LD students have a poor memory for motor responses. Yet, motor memory is enhanced through the activation of the large muscle system (Kaminsky & Powers, 1981) and coordinative practices which relate gross motor response to fine motor response (Arena, 1970).

Example. To help LD students with gross motor deficits, attendant fine motor deficits and motor memory deficits to improve their handwriting, the following activity is suggested:

Step 1. The teacher selects a musical piece which embodies the meter desired for the letter to be practiced. (For our purposes, we will use the Sousa march "Stars and Stripes Forever"; this piece is performed in a two beat meter.)

Step 2. The teacher instructs the students to stand and models the "conducting" of the letter in the vertical plane for the students. (For our purposes, we will use a modified capital B in cursive handwriting, which consists of four strokes. Each stroke corresponds to one beat in the meter of the musical piece.)

Step 3. The teacher counts and has students count along in the desired meter, while modeling the letter strokes as conducting motions.

Step 4. The teacher counts and has students perform the first stroke in the count in isolation.

Step 5. The teacher counts and adds on to the students' movement choreography the remaining strokes, one at a time, rehearsing each addition in isolation.

Step 6. When all of the students have mastered the letter strokes in the vertical plane, the music is started and the students are directed to "conduct" the piece using their letter strokes.

Suggestions for Teaching. This exercise may be varied by having students work in a horizontal plane. It is also adaptable for use as a rhythm development exercise when practicing on paper.

Conclusion

Learning disabled students have a variety of deficits which adversely affect the development of their handwriting skills. This article has presented six adaptable remediative activities for use by teachers of the learning disabled in the course of developing and improving their students' handwriting skills.

In providing handwriting remediation to the learning disabled, it is important to remember that handwriting is a language arts/communication skill which bears profound influence on general academic success as well as personal and social growth. Generally speaking, language arts skills are best taught and learned in an integrative atmosphere (Donoghue, 1985). Thus, one cautionary note should be kept in mind as these strategies are implemented: handwriting,

whenever possible, should not be taught in isolation from other language arts skills.

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Figure 1: Chart Form for use with Letter Charting Activity

A	Ant Ant AA aa
B	Ball Ball BB BB
C	
D	
E	
F	
G	
H	
I	

etc.

Figure 2: Stretch It Out Worksheet

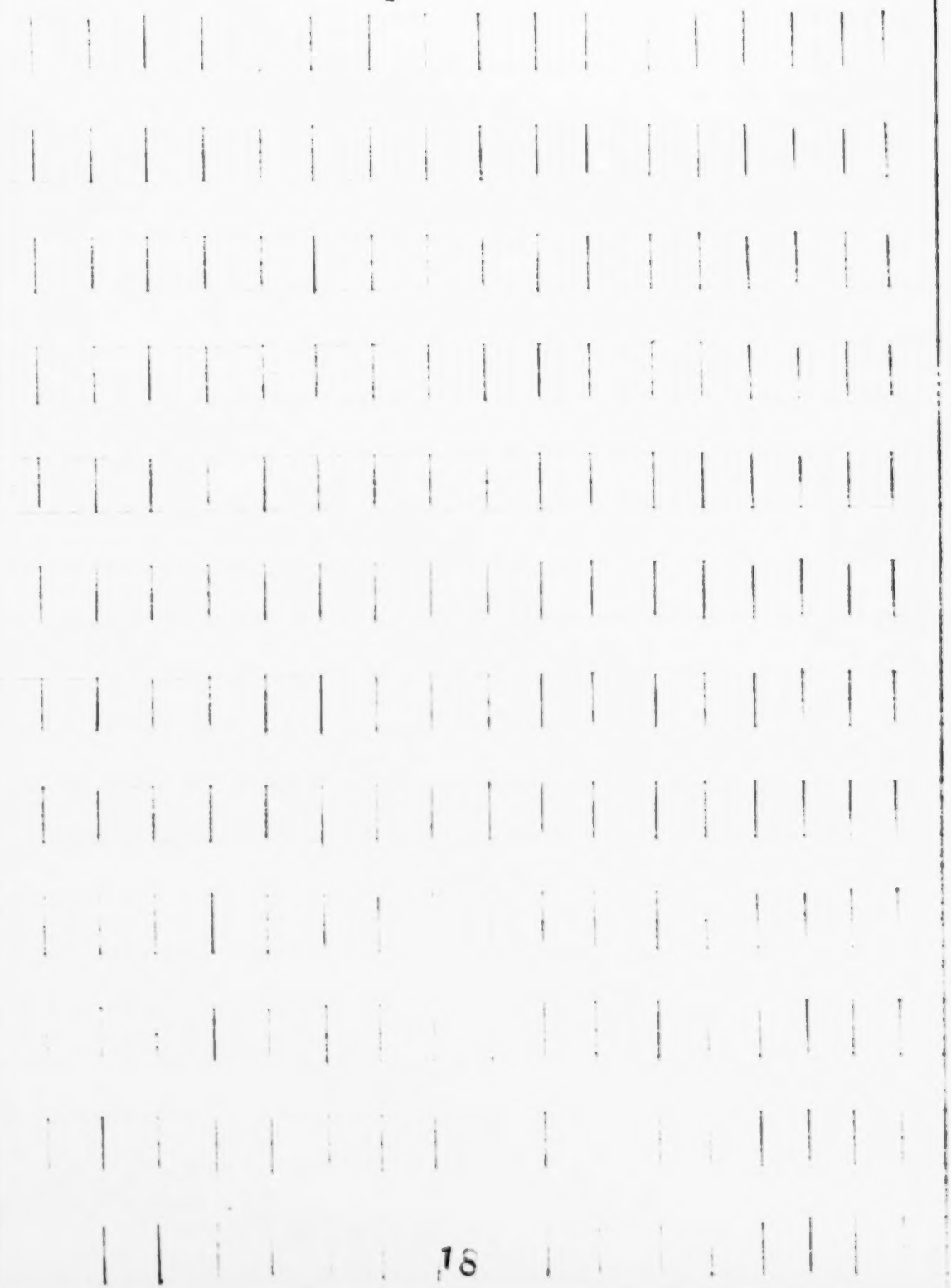

Figure 3: Margin Underlay Sheet